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AN ADDRESS

BY A

RECENT FEMALE VISITER

TO THE

PRISONERS

IN THE

EASTERN PENITENTIARY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

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TO THE
PRISONERS IN THE EASTERN PENITENTIARY.

I HAVE lately seen you in your cells, and now I desire to add a few earnest and serious words to those which I had an opportunity of expressing as I passed from one door to another.

I shall perhaps suggest no new thought to your minds; perhaps touch no hidden spring of feeling; perhaps say nothing that will encourage you to renewed and firmer purposes of amendment; yet I am not willing to leave this prison without proving my interest in your temporal and eternal welfare; without trying to aid your own efforts, and to co-operate with your teachers in advancing the all-important work of reformation. But recollect that this great work depends chiefly on yourselves:—those who are interested to promote your best good, may counsel and exhort, all this will be to little purpose, if you, yourselves, are not convinced of wrong-doing, and of the necessity for adopting earnestly, those means which shall strengthen right resolves, and establish principles of virtuous action. To this end you must first feel that you have offended against the laws of society, that you have sinned against your own souls, that you have transgressed the laws of God.

Friends, 'the ways of the transgressor *are* hard.' You cannot doubt this; you cannot have failed to perceive its application in your own case! What have you ever gained by sinful practices? And what have you *not lost* by them? What advantage, let me ask, have you experienced from self-indulgence, and from the commission of crime, from breaking the laws of man, and the laws of your own conscience, and the laws of God? Suppose, for example, that you have broken but the *tenth* and the *eighth* commandments of the moral law,—that you have *coveted* and *taken possession* of the property of other men: has this done you any lasting good?—For a time, probably, you may have procured some self-indulgence from these ill-gotten possessions, but have these short-lived pleasures been any compensation for the loss of your own self-respect and peace of mind, and for the loss of the respect and the confidence, and the good will of others? Have you been *happy* in this mode of life? Would you again adopt it, with all its doubts, and distrusts, and fast-coming fears of detection?—its restless days and disturbed nights?—its poor gains for the time that now is, and its certain retributions for time that is to come? Do you wish again to live abroad among men, in the consciousness of having with bold and reckless daring, *thrust yourselves down*, low in guilt and iniquity? Are you willing again, and yet again, to hazard the loss of all that makes life most desirable?—to throw away, to trample upon reputation—upon your natural rights as citizens, upon friendship, and upon all family affections? Do not

say this is of little consequence, and that you do not care for these things ; they are of *great* consequence, and *you do care* for them : all men care for them more or less : all men like to be thought well of ; and for this will most men make some exertion, even when they do not mean to conduct in all respects as they ought.

It is not *always* fear of detection and its consequent punishment, which induces you to conceal evil deeds, and hide them from the public eye ; you *do* feel a wish, if you have never as yet clearly defined it, to stand well in the opinion of your fellow-men ;—some few disregard this for a time, but that class is *very small*. I could adduce a thousand proofs in evidence of this assertion : I will state but one, and this you can all understand.

For several years I have visited prisons ; to some of these I have resorted several times each week, for a period of eighteen months, for the purpose of distributing books, imparting instruction, expressing sympathy, and giving advice where it seemed most needed. This has been in state prisons, and county jails, and houses of correction. Do you ask what have been *my feelings* amidst these scenes of human debasement, and woe, and degradation ; surrounded by beings bearing the unequal, but scorching traces of vice, and crime and misdemeanor ?—My very soul has sickened at these aspects of desolation made by sin :—but cannot you comprehend that an all-prevading pity should take the place of horror and disgust,—and that the hope, that the desire of making a fellow being

better and happier should conquer every other sentiment? So it has been, and I have laboured on, not without reward. I will tell you, briefly, how this has been.—Always, in all instances, I have been received civilly, and listened to with attention; and when my visits have been anticipated by frequent and stated recurrence, there has been an eagerness of preparation, a care for neatness and order, a certain good conduct and use of decent language, which in no single instance has been departed from. I have not in memory, a disrespectful or improper word or act, amongst the many hundred persons I have seen. This propriety of speech and decent observance of conduct, has *not* been the result of prison discipline, for I have met it in jails where there has been no discipline at all. It has not been the fear of censure from officers, for oftenest there have been no officers present to enforce it: they *knew I sought their good*, their restoration, their salvation, and in return they desired my esteem; and many in time learnt to desire their own true good, a reformation of heart and life.

They were unwilling I should be informed of any misdemeanour, and veryoften refrained from transgression because I urged it; this was neither the highest nor truest motive for action by any means, but once induced from any motive to forbear offence, they would gradually come to *choose* it for their own sakes: experiencing self-approval from these efforts at self-control, the work of amendment became daily easier and more pleasant. At one prison distinguished by the turbulcnce of its inmates, by riotous conduct and

profanity, I was seriously told by the officers it would be impossible for me to do any good for the prisoners, for "bad they were and bad they would be." And what have you done to make them better ? I asked :—"Nothing, that is not our business."—" Well, then it shall be mine."—I will go now and make my first attempt. The doors were unlocked, and I passed first into the men's prison. It was no pleasant scene this ; but strong in the conviction that these bad passions, shown forth in violent gestures and language might be conquered by gentle kindness, I advanced quickly and firmly to the noisiest group. I raised my hand to secure silence, and whilst the first sense of wonder yet remained, at my appearance in such a place, I said, "Friends they tell me that I shall find only very bad people here, and that they have only bad purposes and feelings :—I do not believe all this. I know you are guilty :—I know you are often wicked in your thoughts and acts, but that you are wholly abandoned to evil, I will not believe. I have come here as your friend :—I am sorry for you—I wish to help you to become more comfortable and happier. Will you listen to me or shall I go away ?"—a dozen voices said, " We will hear you." I sat down upon a bench,—and called one of the most notorious of the group, to open a package of books :—'see,' I continued, 'you have nothing to do here,—you have no person to assist you to spend your time well. I have brought you books, and writing materials, and slates. In return I have something to ask of you :—make no promises,—but I will trust you : forbear till I come again in two days, all

bad language, and all plotting of bad conduct. Those who can write I wish should put on paper their plans of life when they shall be enlarged from prison. Tell me at the same time, something of your history, what has brought you here,—and how I can do you good in aiding any desire you have of amendment. And you William, I continued, addressing the leader of this band, will you help me in my work here?—oblige me by covering these arithmetics and maps, and assist these boys, pointing to five or six who were looking on with curiosity, in learning the lessons I will mark for them to have ready against my return. And boys, see now who will be the best scholars, to each who learns well for a month, losing no lessons, I will give a nice new book. The unexpectedness of my visit, and novelty of my plans, together with the real relief of having something to do, propitiated all,—and I took leave kindly but seriously, and went to the women's department. Here I had much the same scene to encounter, but in addition to the books, I supplied some materials for sewing. I said nothing about their wrong-doing. I urged not strongly any rules of life at that time; it was enough to have awakened some feeling of interest, —some willingness to be employed. I returned after two days. I found a great deal accomplished,—the men had read the books—had written, and the boys had done their tasks, and for the first done them well. But the best of all was, that they had begun to *think*; the interruption to their ill-disposed conversation had given a new turn to their feelings—the books had given new ideas; and having successfully commenced I per-

severed. For several months the work went on—a little was gained constantly, time passed, and some were tried and sentenced, a few were acquitted. I did not lose sight of any of them, and after their sentences were expired, many individuals successfully applied to some trade, or farming labour; and now, after more than three years trial of their well-formed purposes are still pursuing an honest and respectable mode of life. The heretofore disorderly and miserable family is restored to decency and peace—the father, the mother, the children, to use a familiar expression “are getting on in the world.” William, the prisoner, condemned of all,—most turbulent and oftenest punished, the drunkard, the thief, the burglar,—is reformed ; in a retired part of the country he is now established with his family ; endeavouring as far as he can, to make some amends for the injury he has done to them, to himself, and to society. Both he and his wife write to acquaint me how they get along—and some months since they came to see me “to show that they were what they represented themselves, well-clothed, sober, decent people.” Their neighbours bear testimony to their well-ordered lives and conversation. I do not think the work of reformation *easy*, but *I know it can be accomplished.*

I hear from many prisoners often. I have volumes of letters from those I have taught in prisons, who now are worthy and respectable members of society. I too write to them, and sometimes I get leisure to go and see them. I do not mean to imply that *all* have done as they ought, but *many* have,—and are

happy and contented.—I at least have the satisfaction of knowing that for a time most of these had desires for improvement, and I know that when there is a willing mind, and steady exertion, reformation will be abiding.

Now this is my experience of thieves, and burglars, and murderers: there is *some good* left in those who are most debased,—I am *sure* of that. Friends, ponder this truth; take heed and search out this remnant of salvation: offer up your supplications to the Father of Mercies that he will help your weak resolves. He has loved you with an infinite tenderness; he has spared you long, unprofitable servants though you have been:—he will not turn away from him who confesseth his sins, but will forgive you and bless you with many consolations. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon.”

“Pure and devout be every thought,
“Kind and sincere your every word;
“Oh be your lives without a blot,
“Sacred to Christ your heavenly Lord!”

That you may enter upon the better life, I ask you, I entreat you, I urge you, I plead with you all, to use diligently every means of improvement.

Pray daily that you may no more abandon yourselves to the temptations of sin.

“Reflect how soon your life may end,
And think on what your hopes depend;
What aim your busy thought pursue;
What work is done, and what to do.”

Now while time and opportunity are yours, consider and adopt rules for an amended life, and when this present discipline is ended, go forth from your imprisonment here, better men than when you entered within these walls; yes better, wiser, and happier men.

Ponder well the great goodness of God in granting you space for repentance, in permitting you to possess so many aids in this great and solemn work of reformation. Study the precepts and the life of Jesus Christ: read the encouraging and cheering promises of the Gospels; read what the inspired writers have recorded of the renewed life, through the Saviour.—Remember those words of Scripture, “Verily, verily I say unto you, saith Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that *he turn from his iniquity* and live.” “Blessed is he whose transgressions are healed and whose sins are forgiven;”—but a true repentance, a forsaking of sin must precede forgiveness. “Repent that your sins may be blotted out.” “Come unto me,” “come unto me,” said the Saviour, “all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and ye shall find rest to your souls.”

Sinner, rouse thee from thy sleep,
Wake, and o'er thy folly weep;
Rouse thy spirit dark and dead,
Jesus waits his light to shed.

Leave thy folly, cease from crime;
From this hour redeem thy time;
Life secure while ‘yet ‘tis day,’
Peril waits on each delay.

Be not blind and simple still,
Called of Jesus,—learn his will:

Jesus calls from death and night,
Jesus waits to shed his light !'

"Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise *think of these things;*" "and the God of peace sanctify you wholly, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Eastern Penitentiary, July 5th, 1844.